A Modified Framework for Identifying Stigma: News Coverage of Persons with Mental
Illness Killed by Police

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Abstract

This paper examines the types of stigmatizing language and frames present in news reports about persons with mental illness killed by police. A sample of 301 online news reports was content analyzed, of which 132 reports contributed to 231 examples of stigmatizing language or frames. Analysis indicates that the construction of stigma in these news reports does not fully adhere to existing frameworks for identifying stigmatization. Stigmatization that is implicit, and often seemingly innocuous, is almost three times as common in the analyzed news reports than overt and explicit forms of stigmatization. A modified framework for identifying stigmatization is proposed that includes the presence of stigmatizing syntax, implicit stereotypes, stigmatizing myths, and behavior labeling. To the author's knowledge, this study is the first to examine media stigmatization of persons with mental illness killed by police as well as explore stigmatization regarding suicide by cop. Implications of the findings for efforts to destigmatize mental illness are explored.

Keywords: stigma, mental illness, police, mass media, suicide

Introduction

Mental illness is a significant public health issue. In any given year, approximately one in five Americans will experience a mental health disorder (Insel, 2015).

Furthermore, suicide is the tenth most common cause of death in the United States (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.), and the second leading cause of death for individuals aged 15 to 34 (Insel, 2015). Suicide contributes to approximately 40,000 deaths per year (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.), which is triple the number of deaths that can be attributed to homicide (Insel, 2015).

Persons with mental illness are often portrayed in media coverage as being incompetent (Goulden et al., 2011) or “helpless, disempowered and child-like” (Olstead, 2002, p. 634). Furthermore, despite mental illness being a common feature of everyday life, news reports about persons with mental illness often focus on rare, violent events (The Carter Center, 2015). Persons with mental illness are commonly portrayed in the media as violent criminals (Corrigan et al., 2005; Day & Page 1986; Matas, el-Guebaly, Harper, Green, & Peterkin 1986; Olstead, 2002; Shain & Phillips 1991; Wahl, 2003; Wahl & Roth, 1982; Williams & Taylor, 1995).

However, only four percent of violent acts are committed by persons with mental illness (Fazel & Grann, 2006) and research has indicated that persons with mental illness are on average not violent (Choe, Teplin, & Abram, 2008). In fact, persons with mental illness are more likely be *victims* of violence (Choe, Teplin, & Abram, 2008).

Negative media portrayals of persons with mental illness may influence public perceptions. In experimental settings, research has indicated that exposure to news reports associating violence with mental illness influences study participants to perceive people with mental illness as being dangerous (Dietrich, Heider, Matschinger, &

Angermeyer, 2006; Thornton & Wahl, 1996).

The stigmatization of persons with mental illness has been occurring for centuries (Dain, 1994). Persons with mental illness, as well as their families, and even their friends, can experience social barriers as a result of being associated with mental illness (Corrigan, 2004; Corrigan, Green, Lundin, Kubiak, & Penn, 2001; Gary, 2005). The stigma that persons with mental illness may experience can also affect insurance, housing, employment, and their willingness to seek treatment (Wahl, 1999). Goffman (1963) described stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (p. 3), and argued that once someone has been stigmatized “we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human” (p. 5). Furthermore, part of this process of stigmatization is rooted in language because stigmatizing terms are used in everyday language as a “source of metaphor and imagery” (Goffman, 1963, p. 5).

Stigmatizing media portrayals of persons with mental illness may be regarded as a form of structural stigma (Corrigan et al., 2005). Structural stigma is “formed by sociopolitical forces and represents policies of private and government institutions that restrict the opportunities of the groups that are stigmatized” (Corrigan et al., 2005, p. 551).

Link and Phelan (2001) propose a definition of stigma based on interrelated concepts:

stigma exists when the following interrelated components converge. In the first component, people distinguish and label human differences. In the second, dominant cultural beliefs link labeled persons to undesirable characteristics — to negative stereotypes. In the third, labeled persons are placed in distinct categories so as to accomplish some degree of separation of ‘us’ from ‘them.’ In the fourth,

labeled persons experience status loss and discrimination that lead to unequal outcomes... we apply the term stigma when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows them to unfold (p. 367).

Link, Yang, Phelan, and Collins (2004) utilize the definition of stigma proposed by Link and Phelan (2001) to categorize research on stigma. They identify 109 empirical studies and 14 literature reviews published between January 1995 and June 2003 that examined one or more of the following: behavior, labeling, stereotyping, cognitive separating, emotional reactions, expectation of status loss/discrimination, experience of status loss/discrimination, structural discrimination, and behavioral responses to stigma (Link et al., 2004). The authors argued that their examination “represents a broad assessment of current stigma measures in use” (Link et al., 2004, p. 514).

For this study, the concepts of labeling, cognitive separating, and stereotyping are particularly useful in identifying stigmatization. Labeling may be described as “the assigning of social significance to particular characteristics,” while cognitive separating is “when social labels imply a fundamental difference (‘them’) compared with those without the label (‘us’)” (Link et al., 2004, p. 516). Stereotypes are “how labeled differences are linked with negative attributes” (Link et al., 2004, p. 516).

Research on stigmatizing language and frames in media reports has to date focused on what may be regarded as explicitly stigmatizing language and frames, of the kind identified by Goffman (1963); Link and Phelan (2001); and Link et al. (2004). These indicators of stigmatization are easily identifiable and overt. However, a failure to recognize implicit forms of stigmatizing language and frames provides an incomplete perspective of the range of stigmatizing language that may be used.

Implicit stigmatization is constructed by using language and frames that do not fit neatly into the frameworks described by Link and Phelan (2001), and Link et al. (2004). This paper proposes four additional indicators of stigmatization. First, the use of myths regarding mental illness to construct stigma. Second, the use of particular syntax, or word arrangement, rather than word choice, to subtly label individuals with mental illness. Third, labeling not of the individual, but of their behavior, that has negative social connotations. Fourth, implicit stereotypes of violence not on the individual-level, but in the aggregate.

The first part of this paper applies the frameworks proposed by Link and Phelan (2001) and Link et al. (2004) in an analysis of overt and explicit stigmatization in news reports about persons with mental illness killed by police. The second part of the paper then applies the author's proposed modified framework in an examination of implicit stigmatization.

Methods

Data

This paper uses publicly published data created by *The Washington Post* in conjunction with online news reports collected by the author. The data published by *The Washington Post* recorded incidents between January 1, 2015 - December 31, 2016 in the United States in which a police officer, in the line of duty, fatally shot a civilian. The data includes information on the mental health status of individuals killed by police. The information for this data was gathered using news reports, investigative journalism, and police records obtained by open records requests (Fuller, Lamb, Biasotti, & Snook, 2015).

Individuals with mental illness killed by police were identified by the author using *The Washington Post* data. The author then searched for online news reports about their death using their name and the location of the incident, followed by terms such as “police,” “shooting,” and “killed.” Individuals were excluded from the sample if the only information available was law enforcement press releases or blog posts. This resulted in 301 individuals about whom news reports could be gathered. The most informative online news report available for each individual published in English was then selected. The most detailed news report was typically the most recently published. In 299 of the 301 cases, this was a news report published by a news outlet within the United States. One news report was published in the United Kingdom and one news report was published in Canada.

For coding purposes, national news outlets are defined as tabloid and broadsheet newspapers that have a national circulation, or national network news outlets that publish online news reports. Regional news outlets are defined as tabloid and broadsheet newspapers that serve a large regional area or major city. Local news outlets are defined as network affiliates operating at a local level that publish online news reports, local newspapers, or local news websites that journalists contribute to but that do not print news. Table 1 displays frequencies of the types of news source analyzed. Often, the most detailed news report about the incident was from a local news outlet – 238 of the 301 news reports were published by local news outlets. Intuitively this is not surprising. Regional or national news outlets may have more competition among potential events to report on than local news outlets do. The most common type of news source analyzed in this study was online reports published by news networks, followed by newspapers, news websites, and tabloid newspapers.

[Table 1 here]

This sample of news reports is unique in several respects. First, this sample includes particularly salient news reports about persons with mental illness. Associated Press polls U.S. news editors and directors annually regarding what they perceive to be the top story of the year. In 2014, “police killings” was chosen as the top story (Crary, 2014), in 2015 “Black deaths in encounters with police” ranked fifth (Crary, 2015), and in 2016 “Black men killed by police” ranked third (Crary, 2016). Given the high level of public interest, the news reports selected for analysis may be widely read which allows for an analysis of the types of stigmatizing language and frames in news reports garnering great public attention. Second, the mix of local, regional, national, and even international news reports allows for variety in media reporting styles, quality, and intended audience. Third, the sample allows for an examination of the degree to which suicide by cop may be stigmatized or sensationalized in the media. Suicide by cop is a colloquial phrase used to describe “a form of victim-precipitated homicide in which a suicidal individual engages in calculated, life-threatening, and criminal behavior in order to compel the police to use deadly force” (Kingshott, 2009, p. 113).

Coding Procedure

A coding framework for identifying stigmatizing news coverage was developed by using the frameworks proposed by Link and Phelan (2001), and Link et al. (2004); coding anything that could be regarded as being implicitly stigmatizing; and using recommendations on how to report about mental illness and suicide from mental health advocacy groups, media organizations, and researchers. These organizations included the following: American Foundation for Suicide Prevention; Associated Press;

Entertainment Industries Council, Inc.; National Center on Disability and Journalism; and The Carter Center.

Results from the coding were then divided into two categories: explicit stigmatizing language or frames, and implicit. These two categories were then coded into subcategories. For explicit stigmatizing language or frames, the categories are as follows: archaic and derogatory language (labeling), stigmatizing reporting of substance use disorders (labeling), references to devils and demons (labeling), distinctions between being “normal” versus “not normal” (cognitive separating), notions of unpredictable violence (stereotyping), and associations of violence and mental illness in headlines (stereotyping).

For implicit stigmatizing language or frames, the following subcategories were created: not using person-first language (stigmatizing syntax), violence being presented as the aggregate norm for persons with mental illness (implicit stereotyping), persons with mental illness being portrayed as “sufferers” (stigmatizing myth), and stigmatizing and sensationalist reporting of suicide by cop (stigmatizing myth, and behavior labeling).

Each subcategory for both explicit and implicit forms of stigmatizing language and frames was also coded according to who used the stigmatizing language or frame. This could be a community member, a family member, journalist(s) writing the report, or police. If the language or framing was not in quotation marks, it was coded as being attributable to journalist(s). Even if journalist(s) were paraphrasing a family or community member who may have used stigmatizing language, journalist(s) have the ability to choose which language to use. Similarly, if police paraphrased something that a community member or family member said, but it was not in quotation marks, it has

been coded as being attributed to the police. This decision has been made because police are not compelled to use stigmatizing language when paraphrasing and they have the ability to use other language instead.

Sample Characteristics

Of the 301 selected news articles, 132 articles contained at least one reference to stigmatizing language or framing of mental illness (44%). In total there were 231 references to stigmatizing language or framing. Of the news reports with stigmatizing language or framing of mental illness, the median number of references was one and the mean was 1.75. The maximum number of stigmatizing references in a news report was seven. Table 2 displays the frequency of references for explicit and implicit stigmatizing language by news type. It also displays the average frequency for each type of stigmatizing language by news type.

[Table 2 here]

Explicit references to stigmatizing language were most common in tabloid newspapers. The average frequency of explicitly stigmatizing references ranged from 0.33 to two per news report for tabloid newspapers. Perhaps the sensationalist reporting style of tabloid newspapers creates a professional environment conducive to the use of explicitly stigmatizing language. However, this study has only a small sample of tabloid newspapers. Among the different local news types, explicitly stigmatizing language was most common in news websites, followed by local network news, and local newspapers. Perhaps journalists at local news networks and local news websites are not aware of, or are unsure how to apply, guidelines on how to appropriately report on mental illness and avoid using stigmatizing language. Implicitly

stigmatizing language was also more common in reports by local networks and local news websites than it was in reports by local newspapers.

Explicit Stigmatizing Language and Frames

Table 3 displays counts of the number of unique sources and references for subcategories of explicit stigmatizing language or frames. For several of the subcategories, the count for unique sources categorized by who used the language does not add to the total count for each subcategory. This is because one source may include stigmatizing language from different individuals. For example, both a community member and a family member. A total of 44 unique sources contributed to 60 references of explicitly stigmatizing language or frames. Archaic and derogatory language is the most frequent type of explicitly stigmatizing language used, contributing to 22 references, of which 13 are attributable to journalists. Disparaging remarks regarding substance use disorders is the second most frequent type of explicitly stigmatizing language present in the analyzed news reports. Again, the majority of these references are from journalists. This is not to suggest that journalists are more or less stigmatizing than community members, family members, or police. Rather, the purpose of the comparison is to highlight how journalists may include stigmatizing content from quoted sources. There were several references to devils and demons in relation to persons with mental illness and these references are from family members, community members, and journalists. Explicit associations between violence and mental illness were present in five news report headlines. References to persons with mental illness as being “not normal” (Alcindor, 2015) or being unpredictably violent can be exclusively attributed to community members and family members.

[Table 3 here]

Labeling

Archaic and derogatory language. The use of archaic and derogatory language is one of the ways in which mental illness is explicitly stigmatized. Terms like “crazy,” “crazed,” “deranged,” “nuts,” and “psycho” perpetuate stereotypes and may deter individuals from seeking mental health treatment (The Carter Center, 2015). The term “insane” is a legal term and should not be used in others contexts as it may be considered offensive (National Center on Disability and Journalism, 2015). Associated Press (2013) recommends that derogatory language should only be included if it is part of a quotation that is *absolutely essential* to the news report. Furthermore, how journalists approach the context of the quote is critical to ensure that stereotypes are not reinforced (Associated Press, 2013). Reporters should also be careful when referring to medical facilities that exclusively treat persons with mental illness. For example, the National Center on Disability and Journalism (2015) recommends that the phrases “mental health hospital” or “psychiatric hospital” be used (p. 15).

Archaic and derogatory language was common in the analyzed news reports. Examples of derogatory language used by community members and relatives included “crazy” (Fabian, 2015); “insane” (Lemoine & Delong, 2015); and “mental” (Jones, 2016). Journalists used phrases such as “crazed gunman” (Gillman, 2015) and “crazed mother” (Good, 2016). In a description of an individual’s history of treatment in psychiatric hospitals the term “mental hospitals” was used by journalists (Vargas & Avila, 2015). Police reportedly described an individual with mental illness as “some nut, tweak just freaking out” (Khalil, 2017). Example 1.0 is a quote from a police chief

that describes a person with mental illness as being “deranged” (Rush, 2015). The quote portrays this particular individual with mental illness as being unpredictable and arguably “not quite human” (Goffman, 1963, p. 5), given the description of the individual as “crawling” while “naked” (Rush, 2015).

Example 1.0

“The caller reported a male acting deranged, knocking on doors, crawling around on the ground naked” (Rush, 2015).

Stigmatizing language regarding substance use disorders. The phrase “substance abuse” is no longer included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and instead the phrase “substance use disorder” is used. Some medical professionals may still use the phrase “substance abuse,” however this term is no longer used to describe a specific diagnosis. While the use of the phrase “substance abuse” may not be perceived to be as stigmatizing as other forms of stigmatization explored in this paper, it is important to explore how journalists may use the phrase “substance abuse” or the term “abuse.” Furthermore, it has been argued that using the terms “clean” or “dirty” when referring to drug test results equates “symptoms of illness to filth” (National Center on Disability and Journalism, 2015, p. 2).

Stigmatizing language was used in the analyzed news reports to describe substance use disorders. For example, one community member used the phrase “drug abuse” (Lipscomb, 2015). The following terms and phrases were used by journalists: “clean” (de Guzman, 2015); “abused drugs” (Richardson, 2015); “substance abuse” (Lipscomb, 2015); and expressions of judgment such as “self-destructive behavior” (Hill, 2015).

Devils and demons. Disturbingly, there were references in the news reports from community members, family members, and journalists likening persons with mental illness to the devil and demons. Other researchers have also identified the use of references to the devil and demons in relation to persons with mental illness (Fleming & Manvell 1985). Example 1.1 is a quote from a community member.

Example 1.1

“The look in his face when he was pacing outside — it was like I was looking into the face of the devil” (Varn, 2016).

Family members described relatives with mental illness as having “demons” (de Guzman, 2015) and being “possessed” (Salzo, 2016). Journalists also used these terms. For example, an individual with mental illness was described as being “haunted by personal demons” (Hess, 2015). While the use of the term “haunted” (Hess, 2015) may appear to suggest that the individual is not responsible for their mental illness, historically possession has been regarded as something deserved for those who have sinned (Dain, 1994).

Cognitive Separating

“Not normal.” Individuals with mental illness were also described by family members as being “not normal” (Alcindor, 2015) and “not in [their] right mind” (McIntyre, 2016). Distinctions between being “normal” and “not normal” reinforce perceived differences between persons with mental illness and persons without mental illness, and may be regarded as a form of cognitive separating. Example 1.2 is a quote from a community member.

Example 1.2

“He’s clearly not mentally there. At least not enough to make a sound decision”

(ABC15.com staff, 2016).

Stereotypes

Unpredictable violence. Stigmatizing media frames were identified in the analyzed news reports that portrayed individuals with mental illness as being unpredictably violent. Example 1.3 is language used by a journalist. The term “snapped” (O’Brien, 2016) portrays acts of violence by persons with mental illness as having no warning signs.

Example 1.3

“It was a tragic end to weeks of turmoil and friends say he just snapped under mounting pressure” (O’Brien, 2016).

Violent associations in headlines. Explicit associations between mental illness and violence were most common in news report headlines. Perhaps these frames were most prevalent in headlines because the sensationalist aspects of an incident may attract more readers and therefore the headlines analyzed have been crafted to be particularly sensationalist. Examples 1.4 and 1.5 construct the identity of persons with mental illness as being primarily characterized by violent and dangerous behavior. By describing the mental health status of these individuals after priming readers to think about violence, readers may associate violence with mental illness.

Example 1.4

“Police: Tarboro shooter had been treated for mental issues” (Swain, 2015).

Example 1.5

“Armed suspect shot by Jacksonville police had been suicidal, wanted to go out ‘Waco-style’ ” (Treen, 2015).

Implicit Stigmatizing Language and Frames

This part of the analysis shifts analytic focus from an examination of explicit stigmatizing language and frames to an examination of the implicit. The latter represents subtle, and seemingly innocuous, language and frames that stigmatize persons with mental illness in news reports. Table 4 displays counts for unique sources and references regarding implicit stigmatizing language or frames. A total of 107 unique sources contributed to 171 stigmatizing references. For several of the subcategories, the count for unique sources categorized by who used the language does not add to the total count for each subcategory. This is because at times one source may include stigmatizing language from different individuals, for example both a community member and a family member.

Many of the implicit stigmatizing sources and references were in the form of not using person-first language. This category contributed to 55 (51%) unique sources and 79 (46%) references. Depicting persons with mental illness as being helpless “sufferers” was also common, contributing to 39 unique sources and 45 references. Also common was stigmatizing and sensationalist reporting of suicide by cop. There were 29 unique sources for this subcategory, contributing to 32 references. Less common were implicit references to violence being the norm for persons with mental illness, with 12 unique sources contributing to 15 references. [Table 4 here]

Stigmatizing Syntax: Not Using Person-first Language

Person-first language is language that describes an individual as having a particular disorder, rather than describing an individual as the disorder itself (The Carter Center, 2015). For example, rather than using the term “schizophrenic” or the phrase “the mentally ill,” the phrases “a person with schizophrenia” or “people with mental illness” should be used instead (National Center on Disability and Journalism, 2015, p. 22). Person-first language therefore relies on a particular type of syntax construction; syntax that puts the “person” first in descriptions of mental illness. Using person-first language maintains “the individuality of people rather than defining them by a condition” (Stuber & Achterman, 2010, p. 4). Mental illness is therefore regarded not as a defining characteristic of someone, but rather as only one aspect of an individual’s life. Not using person-first language is distinct from cognitive separating because cognitive separating tends to be explicitly derogatory. In contrast, not using person-first language subtly subsumes the personhood of an individual with mental illness underneath what is perceived to be their master status: mental illness. This paper argues that not using person-first language subtly stigmatizes persons with mental illness through the use of particular syntax. Example 2.0 is a quote from a family member of an individual with mental illness killed by police that highlights why it is important to use person-first language.

Example 2.0

“She was angered by headlines that described her son as a ‘51-year-old suicidal man.’ ‘A person shouldn’t be labeled by the last hour of their life. It’s not who they are,’ she said. ‘That was my son’ ” (Bernstein, 2015).

Examples of family members not using person-first language included phrases such as “he was schizophrenic” (Suriani, 2015), and “mentally ill people” (Hatfield, 2016).

Journalists used phrases such as “mentally ill subjects” (Jacobo, 2016), “a paranoid schizophrenic” (Hawkes, 2015), and “suicidal people” (Tron, 2015).

Specifically regarding the use of person-first language when describing persons with substance use disorders, the National Center on Disability and Journalism (2015) recommends against using the terms “addict” and “alcoholic.” These terms do not adhere to person-first language and instead define the individual by their mental illness. Instead, the phrase “someone experiencing a drug/alcohol problem” may be used (National Center on Disability and Journalism, p. 3). In the analyzed news reports, journalists used stigmatizing terms and phrases such as “drug addict” (Vargas & Avila, 2015) and “alcoholic” (Tron, 2015).

Implicit Stereotype: Violence as the Aggregate Norm for People with Mental Illness

This section explores implicit associations between violence and mental illness. These frames differ from explicit stereotypes that associate violence with mental illness, as examined above and commonly examined in research on stigma (Corrigan et al., 2005; Day & Page 1986; Matas et al., 1986; Olstead, 2002; Shain & Phillips 1991; Wahl, 2003; Wahl & Roth, 1982; Williams & Taylor, 1995). Rather than making direct individual-level connections between violence and mental illness, these references implicitly view *not* being violent as a deviation from the aggregate norm of the behavior of persons with mental illness. Many of the individuals with mental illness in the analyzed news reports did behave aggressively or violently toward family members,

community members, or police. However, the stigmatizing frames identified in the news reports often did not make explicit individual-level associations between mental illness and violence. Rather, the frames associated violent behavior with persons with mental illness in the aggregate. Examples 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3 demonstrate of this type of stigmatizing framing.

Example 2.1

“*though* he suffered from mental illness and had an alcohol addiction, he had no history of physical violence... Mould, who is bipolar and depressed, has had a drinking problem for years *but* never has been violent or physically abusive” (emphasis added, Wasser, 2016).

Example 2.2

“he was a recovering drug addict, *but* did not have a violent past, family members said” (emphasis added, Vargas & Avila, 2015).

Example 2.3

“Hinson said Poole suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder from his time serving in the Navy. *However*, he said Poole was never violent” (emphasis added, Hanson, 2015).

Stigmatizing Myth: “Sufferers” of Mental Illness

The use of stigmatizing myths is one of the ways that mental illness is implicitly stigmatized in news reports. This type of stigmatization does not fit neatly into the categories of labeling, cognitive separating, or stereotyping. Myths regarding individuals with mental illness as “suffering” are different from stereotypes about criminality and violence. Stereotypes about suffering are perhaps rooted in sympathy

for persons with mental illness, in contrast to stereotypes about criminality and violence, yet the outcome is stigmatization because of pitying assumptions about the quality of life for persons with mental illness. Mental health advocacy organizations and media organizations have recommended against using phrases such as “afflicted with,” “suffers from,” and “victims of” when describing persons with mental illness (Associated Press, 2013; National Center on Disability and Journalism, 2015; Stuber & Achterman, 2010). When individuals with mental illness are portrayed as helpless victims, this furthers misconceptions that mental illness is not treatable and that recovery is not possible.

Stigmatizing and Sensationalist Reporting of Suicide by Cop

The following four types of stigmatizing or sensational news reporting were identified in the analyzed news reports: references to “committing” suicide; implying that suicide can be attributed to a single cause; sensationalizing suicide by cop; and reporting that there were “no signs” prior to suicide. Table 5 displays counts of references to stigmatizing and sensationalist language in relation to suicide by cop. The most common type of stigmatizing framing was that there was a single cause of suicide by cop, contributing to 16 references. Of these, 13 are attributable to journalists. There were nine references to “committing” suicide. Framing the behavior of an individual with mental illness as having “no signs” was not as common and there were four references. There were three references that sensationalized suicide by cop.

[Table 5 here]

Behavior labeling: “committing” suicide. The term “commit” should be avoided when describing suicide, and instead the phrases such as “took his/her own life” or “died by suicide” should be used instead (Beaton, Forster, & Maple, 2013).

Traditionally, the term “commit” has been associated with sin and criminality (Beaton, Forster, & Maple, 2013). The Associated Press advises the following: “avoid using *committed suicide* except in direct quotations from authorities... the verb *commit* with *suicide* can imply a criminal act. Laws against suicide have been repealed in the United States and many other places” (Associated Press, 2016, p. xxvi). The use of the term “commit” in relation to suicide may therefore be regarded as behavior labeling. This is labeling, not of the individual, but of their behavior, that has negative social connotations. At least when writing within the context of the United States, the term “commit” should not be used. Examples of journalists using this stigmatizing language included the following statements: “threatened to commit suicide” (Bien, 2015) and “committing ‘suicide by cop’ ” (Jarvis, 2015).

Stigmatizing myth: single cause suicide. Advocacy groups warn against romanticizing suicide as being the result of a single event (Stuber & Achterman, 2010). This type of reporting “leaves the public with an overly simplistic and misleading understanding of suicide” (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention et al., n.d., p. 2). Mental illness is associated with approximately 90% of suicides at the time of death (Stuber & Achterman, 2010). Suggesting that there suicide was the result of a single event perpetuates stigmatizing myths about suicide. Example 2.4 is a quote from a family member, while examples 2.5 and 2.6 are statements from journalists.

Example 2.4

“He just lost his job, and he had a setback” (Tron, 2015).

Example 2.5

“a neighbor said Kendrick had been having marital problems” (Figueroa, 2015).

Example 2.6

“Investigators have not determined a motive for the slayings, but said Jason Hendrix was angry at his parents for taking away his computer privileges days before the killings” (Wagner, 2015).

Stigmatizing myth: “no signs.” Advocacy groups have recommended against reporting suicide as being “inexplicable” or “without warning” (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention et al., n.d, p. 1). Most people who die by suicide do exhibit warning signs (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention et al., n.d). News reports suggesting that there were “no signs” that an individual might attempt suicide perpetuate common misconceptions that there are no signs and that suicide is not preventable. Examples from journalists using this stigmatizing frame included the following: “there were no signs he was suicidal” (Chang, 2015), and “his family said there were no signs that he was in crisis” (Pekarsky & O’Brien, 2016). Example 2.7 is a quote from a community member.

Example 2.7

“I wish there were signs. It took us all by surprise, and we are all hurting and praying for his family” (Nickerson, 2016).

Sensationalist reporting of suicide. Suicide should not be described in sensationalist terms, for example as an “epidemic” or “skyrocketing” (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention et al., n.d., p. 1). Instead, data should be consulted and non-sensationalist language should be carefully chosen. For example, terms such as “rise” or “higher” could be used (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention et al., n.d., p. 1). References to sensationalist language when describing suicide by cop were

present in the analyzed news reports. For example, a family member described suicide by cop as “this new trend” (Tron, 2015), and a journalist described suicide by cop as “a growing, and troubling, national phenomenon” (Roberts, 2015).

Discussion

This study sought to understand if, and how, mental illness is stigmatized in online news reports about persons with mental illness killed by police. The results indicate that stigmatizing references and frames are present in online news reports about persons with mental illness killed by police. Of the 301 analyzed news reports, 132 reports contained at least one reference to stigmatizing language (44%) and in total there were 231 stigmatizing references. A total of 44 unique sources contributed to 60 explicitly stigmatizing references. Regarding implicit stigmatization, 107 unique sources contributed to 171 stigmatizing references.

Research on stigmatizing language and frames in media reports has to date focused on explicitly stigmatizing language and frames, of the kind identified by Goffman (1963), Link and Phelan (2001), and Link et al. (2004). In particular, indicators of stigmatization proposed in these frameworks include labeling, cognitive separating, and stereotyping. These indicators of stigmatization highlight stigmatization that is overt and explicit. The news reports analyzed in this study did contain these types of stigmatization. Examples of labeling included the use of archaic language, discussion of the devil and demons, and derogatory discussions of substance use disorders. Descriptions of individuals with mental illness being “not normal” may be regarded as a type of cognitive separating. Regarding stereotypes, individuals were portrayed as unpredictably violent and violence was juxtaposed with descriptions of mental illness in

news report headlines. This stereotype associating violence with mental illness is congruent with existing research that has indicated that individuals with mental illness are commonly portrayed in the media as violent criminals (Corrigan et al., 2005; Day & Page 1986; Matas et al., 1986; Olstead, 2002; Shain & Phillips 1991; Wahl, 2003; Wahl & Roth, 1982; Williams & Taylor, 1995).

However, based on the analysis of news reports about individuals with mental illness killed by police in this study, this paper proposed four additional indicators of stigmatization that may be regarded as implicitly stigmatizing. First, the use of myths regarding mental illness to construct stigma. Specifically, by portraying individuals with mental illness as helpless “sufferers.” Second, the use of particular syntax, rather than word choice, to subtly subsume the personhood of an individual underneath the perceived master status of mental illness. Third, implicit stereotypes of violence not on the individual-level, but in the aggregate. To the author’s knowledge, this study is the first to examine the stigmatization of persons with mental illness who were killed by police. This study presented an analysis of this stigmatization regarding “committing” suicide by cop as a type of behavior labeling; using mental illness myths to attribute a single cause to their suicide or suggest that there were no signs that the individual may attempt to die by suicide; and sensationalizing suicide by cop.

Theoretical and Practical implications

Paying attention to implicit stigma in addition to explicit stigma has both theoretical and practical benefits. From a theoretical perspective, the prevalence of implicit stigma in the analyzed news reports suggests that explicit forms of stigma may be supplanted as they evolve and take on implicit forms. Arguably, this has parallels to how racism in the news has become more coded and implicit over time (Entman, 1990).

For example, Entman (1990) stated that “a ‘modern’ form of racism has arisen... modern racism is an updated and somewhat veiled form of anti-black sentiment” (p. 332-333). Researchers should pay attention to how the stigmatization of mental illness has evolved in the media to become similarly veiled and implicit.

The research presented in this paper also has practical implications for efforts to destigmatize portrayals of persons with mental illness in the news. If researchers and advocacy organizations do not identify and concern themselves with implicit forms of stigma, the stigmatization of persons with mental illness will continue in subtle forms. Successfully combating stigma depends first on identifying the full range of forms which stigmatization may take and explicit stigmatization is only one part of this. Identifying and being aware of implicit forms of stigma may allow advocates for mental illness destigmatization to expand the focus of their education efforts.

Additionally, while guides for appropriately reporting on mental illness are widely available, a significant proportion of the news reports analyzed contained stigmatizing language or references. This suggests that there may be a delay between consensus among advocacy organizations about appropriate language, and the quality of news reporting regarding persons with mental illness.

Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this study is the disparity in the number of different types of news reports analyzed, with local news reports accounting for 238 of the 301 news reports analyzed. One should be careful inferring representativeness from the sample, particularly for the news categories that had a particularly small sample size. However, the number of individuals with mental illness killed by police in the United States will increase, as will the number of news reports about these incidents. As the sample size

of available news reports increases, future research should apply the modified framework proposed in this paper to examine whether some news sources are more likely than others to use explicit versus implicit stigmatizing language. In particular, there may be differences between tabloid newspapers, online news websites, local news networks, and newspapers. Research has indicated that exposure to news reports associating violence with mental illness influences individuals to perceive people with mental illness as being dangerous (Dietrich et al., 2006; Thornton & Wahl, 1996). If there are differences in the types of stigmatizing language present in different news sources, this may influence individuals who consume different types of news sources to have differing views toward people with mental illness.

Future research should also examine why there appears to be a disjuncture between guidelines for reporting on mental illness and the presence of stigmatizing language in news reports. For example, are some journalists and news organizations unaware of these resources and reporting guidelines, or do some journalists not fully understand how to apply these resources to ensure responsible reporting? An understanding of why there appears to be a disjuncture may assist in efforts to combat the subtle forms of stigmatization discovered in this paper. In particular, if journalists are unaware of, or unable to professionally apply, mental illness reporting guidelines, journalists should better educate themselves in collaboration with mental health advocacy organizations.

The modified framework proposed in this paper should also be applied to news reports about people with mental illness more generally, beyond news reports exclusively about persons with mental illness killed by police. There may be differences in the ways in which individuals killed by police are portrayed in the media due to the current heightened interest in these news reports. For example, perhaps they are

particularly sensationalized which may encourage the use of stigmatizing language.

Conclusion

The modified framework proposed in this paper best encompasses the range of stigmatizing language and references discovered in the analyzed data. This modified framework includes the following as explicit forms of stigmatization in news reports: labeling, cognitive separating, and stereotyping. Implicit forms of stigmatization that should supplement explicit types of stigmatization in analyses of stigma include the following: stigmatizing syntax, implicit stereotypes of aggregate-level violence, stigmatizing myths, and behavior labeling. This modified framework allows for researchers to identify a more comprehensive range of stigmatization, and in turn better combat stigma.

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Appendix: Tables

Table 1. News Type Frequencies

Type of News Report	International	National	Regional	Local	Total
Newspaper	0	12	33	80	125
Network	1	8	0	133	142
Tabloid	1	3	5	0	9
Website	0	0	0	25	25
Total	2	23	38	238	301

Table 2. Frequencies of Stigmatizing Language by News Type

Type of News Outlet	Explicit	Average Explicit	Implicit	Average Implicit	Total
International Network ($n = 1$)	0	0	0	0	0
International Tabloid ($n = 1$)	2	2	0	0	2
National Newspaper ($n = 12$)	0	0	8	0.67	8
National Network ($n = 8$)	1	0.13	4	0.5	5
National Tabloid ($n = 3$)	1	0.33	6	2	7
Regional Newspaper ($n = 33$)	7	0.21	23	0.7	30
Regional Tabloid ($n = 5$)	2	0.4	3	0.6	5
Local Newspaper ($n = 80$)	12	0.15	35	0.44	47
Local Network ($n = 133$)	28	0.21	76	0.57	104
Local News Website ($n = 25$)	7	0.28	16	0.64	23
Total $N = 301$	60		171		231

Table 3. Frequencies of Unique Sources and References for Explicitly Stigmatizing Language

Type of Stigmatizing Language/Framing	Unique Sources	References
Archaic/Derogatory Language (Labeling)	15	22
Community	3	4
Family	3	3
Journalists	8	13
Police	2	2
Substance Use Disorders (Labeling)	15	18
Community	1	1
Family	1	1
Journalists	14	16
Police	0	0
Devils and Demons (Labeling)	9	9
Community	4	4
Family	2	2
Journalists	3	3
Police	0	0
Not Normal (Cognitive Separating)	3	3
Community	1	1
Family	2	2
Journalists	0	0
Police	0	0
Unpredictable Violence (Stereotype)	2	3
Community	1	1
Family	2	2
Journalists	0	0
Police	0	0
Violent Associations in Headlines (Stereotype)	5	5
Community	0	0
Family	0	0
Journalists	5	5
Police	0	0
Total	44	60

Table 4. Frequencies of Unique Sources and References for Implicitly Stigmatizing Language

Type of Stigmatizing Language/Framing	Unique Sources	References
Not Using Person-first Language (Stigmatizing Syntax)	55	79
Community	0	0
Family	10	10
Journalists	47	69
Police	0	0
Violence as the Norm for Persons with Mental Illness (Implicit Stereotype)	12	15
Community	0	0
Family	2	2
Journalists	12	13
Police	0	0
Sufferers of Mental Illness (Stigmatizing Myths)	39	45
Community	0	0
Family	1	1
Journalists	36	41
Police	3	3
Stigmatizing/Sensationalist Reporting of Suicide by Cop (Stigmatizing myths, and Behavior Labeling)	29	32
Community	3	3
Family	2	2
Journalists	25	27
Police	0	0
Total	107	171

Table 5. Frequencies of Stigmatizing or Sensationalist Reporting of Suicide by Cop (29 unique sources)

Type of Stigmatizing Language/Framing	References
“Committing” Suicide	9
Community	1
Family	0
Journalists	8
Police	0
Single Cause Suicide	16
Community	1
Family	1
Journalists	13
Police	0
Sensationalizing Media Coverage	3
Community	0
Family	1
Journalists	2
Police	0
“No Signs”	4
Community	1
Family	1
Journalists	2
Police	0
Total	32